DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 498 CG 027 974

AUTHOR Al Naser, Fahad
TITLE Social Change & Marriage Norms-Values in the Middle East. A Case-Study of Kuwait.
PUB DATE 1996-11-00
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (58th, Minneapolis, MN, November 14-18, 1996).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Standards; Cultural Influences; Foreign Countries; *Marriage; Mate Selection; Social Behavior; *Social Change; Social Influences; Social Structure; *Sociocultural Patterns; Values
IDENTIFIERS *Kuwait

ABSTRACT

The term "social change" refers to variations over time in the ecological ordering of populations and communities, in patterns of roles and social interactions, and in the cultures of societies. Some facets of social change in one middle eastern country are presented in this paper. The study looks at the influence of social changes on marriage norms, and was conducted in the context of the socio-cultural change that has accompanied the altered political and economic circumstances of the country. After a brief literature review and history, the details of mate selection, age criteria, and marriage ceremonies are presented. Results of the research indicate that the people of this country have a strong tendency to follow dictates of age, religion, sect, nationality, and caste when marrying someone. However, the numbers of those marrying across these lines has increased in the past 10 years, especially among people of higher socio-economic status with a college education and a high-status job. It is assumed that these kinds of marriages will increase during the 1990s. (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 410 498

SOCIAL CHANGE & MARRIAGE NORMS - VALUES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A CASE-STUDY OF KUWAIT

BY FAHAD AL NASER, Ph.D.
KUWAIT UNIVERSITY - FACULTY OF ARTS
SOCIOLOGY & SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT

A PAPER PREPARED FOR THE 58TH ANNUAL MEETING
OF THE NCFR CONFERENCE
5 - 9 NOVEMBER 1996

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

F. Al Naser

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CG027974

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

2. GOALS

3. RESEARCH METHODS

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

5. DISCUSSION & DATA ANALYSIS
   - A. MATE SELECTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE
   - B. MARRIAGE CEREMONIES
   - C. AGE CRITERIA

6. CONCLUSIONS & RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

The term "Social Change" refers to variations over time in the ecological ordering of populations and communities, in patterns of roles and social interactions, in the structure and functioning of institutions, and in the cultures of societies. Changes can result from endogenous forces (forces building within the society) as well as from exogenous forces (forces exerted from the outside). Changes, in general, do not occur quickly, but when they do occur, they alter the ecological order, the system of stratification and the social institutions of entire societies.

In recent years, a new social structure has developed in the Middle East. The increase in educated members of both sexes, cultural contact with the Western and Eastern worlds and significant migration of foreigners, has led to a more heterogeneous population and open society.

The recent past has witnessed the importance of the Middle East on a rising graph. This is because of it's strategic location between the three continents on the world map. It's rich history, enviable economic wealth and moreover and the fact that the three main religions were born in this region, are other reasons that are considered. Majority of the states in the Middle East are dominated by one religion, the religion of Islam and boasts of the Arabic language being their native tongue.

In this study we shall focus on the Kuwaiti society in particular. A brief introduction to Kuwait would mention the fact that this traditional community consisted of former tribes that had immigrated from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula around 1716. This initial wave of immigration of major tribes was followed by that of many other large tribes, clans, and extended families, from neighbouring areas. The traditional community that evolved was structurally simple and dependent upon very limited natural resources.

In an historical study that outlined the origins of Kuwaiti society, its activities, and its political structure El-Ebraheem (1975) stated: "The political system of early Kuwait was very primitive indeed. The tribe was at the centre of the social system. The economy was simple and based on fishing and the pearl industry. The town, although small, was the centre of commercial activities".

The turning point in the history of Kuwait was the discovery of oil in 1946. In 1961, Kuwait became an independent political state and, due to many socio-economic and political reasons, became one of the fastest developing countries in the region. Although the discovery of oil accelerated the changes and helped shape rapid socio-economic change, Kuwait's comprehensive socio-economic development was the product of many factors. In addition, many young Kuwaitis were encouraged to go abroad for further education. Since then, this heterogeneous society has experienced an increase in the incidence of heterogeneous marriages, not only in terms of nationality, but also in terms of religion, sect, age and other social variables. Therefore, the whole society was, to some extent, exposed to and influenced by foreign cultures.

Social change is a universal phenomena which is taking place in every corner of the world, be it tribal, rural, urban or industrial. The degree and rapidity of changes does differ from society to society. The reasons could be technological and/or industrial. Middle Eastern societies are no exception. They, too, have been affected by social changes. The rural, tribal and urban areas have all undergone changes. We see mixed social behaviour in various aspects of their lives. A simple example being the marriage ceremonies, for instance. On the occasion, parties are thrown in five star hotels, yet, the dress style, music, rituals, etc. remain traditional. Marriage norms and values also differ among people hailing from the same country and even differs from one culture to another even in one society be it rural, urban, or Bedouin. Moreover, expansion of population resulted in the build-up of governmental services, for the use of the public, such as education, health and social welfare and also brought people of the Middle East into interaction with people of different social, economic and political views.

GOALS

This study will shed light on some Middle Eastern countries and Kuwait specifically, since it is going through a rapid socio-economic change which, consequently, is affecting every aspect of social life.

It will also show how far the social changes are affecting some marriage norms and related aspects in some Middle Eastern countries, especially in the Gulf. Furthermore, it will help one to understand the future of these elements in the affected societies.

This study was conducted in the context of the socio-cultural change that has accompanied the altered political and economic circumstances of Kuwait and thereby emphasises and explains the socio-cultural characteristics of marriages in Kuwait.

Furthermore, the study indicates the social and cultural factors that are likely to foster or affect intermarriage in a Kuwaiti society.

RESEARCH METHODS

Talking about the Middle East as one community or one unit is very difficult due to the diversities and differences within each community. There are many different languages in the Middle East, Arabic being the dominant language. There are many religions but, Islam is the main religion, there are different ethnic groups even between Arabs themselves and then there are the Turkish, the Persians, the Israelis besides the Arab community. So talking about the Middle East and generalizing would be a contradictory issue so I have limited the discussion to a society, Kuwait in particular, that is currently undergoing a rapid social. I have taken Kuwait as an example which apparently happens to be a very good case study which denotes and represents a society undergoing rapid social changes and we could use those same examples and generalize the facts about other Gulf States. It would be a kind of comparison.

Another systematic problem we might face concerns the research methods that are based on the statistical analysis - all the statistics are official statistics obtained from the Ministries. Although I'm not suspicious about these statistics especially in Kuwait because they apply the rules of the United Nations when making statistical analysis but, they have some limitations.

The data which was obtained from the records of the Ministry of Justice will be statistically analysed and explained from the sociological perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on marriages in Kuwait or the Middle East in general, is very rare and use little or no substantive data. There are a few ethnographic studies concerning the basis of mate selection, marriage norms, and values of tribal societies in the area. Anthropologists (Barth, 1956; Ayoub, 1959; Patai, 1962, Atoun, 1972) have studied patriarchal parallel cousin marriages (FDB) among Bedouin tribes, There are, however, few sociological studies, and these that exist are about family structure and marriage customs in general (Nahas, 1956; Goode, 1963; Protho & Diab, 1982).

Talcott Parsons and Wilbert E. Moore have suggested that a theory of society and a theory of social changes are inseparable. Parsons closed his discussion of change stating:

> "Perhaps, even it is not too much to hope that this chapter as a whole will convince the reader that there is a certain falsity in the dilemma between "static" and "dynamic" emphasis. If the theory is good, which ever type of problem it tackles most directly, there is no reason to believe that it will not be equally applicable to the problems of social change and those processes within a stabilised system."

One study by Daniel Lerner, emphasised the modernisation of communication media as a contribution to change in the Middle East region. In yet another study (T.B. Bottomore, 1963), explained that altering the production process in a society will cause concurrent changes in social relations and will, therefore, foster the emergence of new values.

Dixon (1971) calculated the husband-wife age difference in 55 Middle East countries including Asian and European. He found that in 27.3% of the countries, the average difference is less than three years; in 40.5%, the gap was three or less than four years; in 10.9%, it four or less than five years and in 21.8% of the countries, the age difference was five years or more.

In the same study, Dixon also found that husbands tended to be older than their wives in all samples. The difference ranged from 1.9 years in Yugoslavia to 9 years in Libya. In the Middle East the grooms are an average of 5.3 years older than their brides; Eastern European grooms were 2.9 years older and Asian grooms were found to be 4.7 years older than their brides. The average was 3.8 years for all samples examined. The countries that had the greatest age difference between groom and bride were Libya with a difference of 9 years and Iran with close to 7 years difference.

A study by Hind Nassif, 1978, focused on a small, rural community in rural Tunisia. Her research indicates a slight shift in traditional patterns due to expanded educational opportunities, increase contact with the city and government planning for rural development.

Sheikh Abrar Hussain (1976) focused on finding out the main factors and problems in the institution of marriage and the effect of social change on its patterns in an Indian society. He concluded that old traditions, customs and ceremonies are becoming obsolete and changes are taking place with the evolution of a new society. As a whole, increase in knowledge is an added factor responsible for modification and changes in customs.

In Kuwait, for instance, although industrialisation has not proceeded very far, the processes of urbanisation and Westernization have jumped forward with a speed and intensity rarely found elsewhere. As other Middle Eastern countries become further involved in world economy, they will ultimately witness their cultures influenced by Western ideas and thus begin to experience changes of the nature that Kuwait is currently undergoing.

DISCUSSION & DATA ANALYSIS

A. MATE SELECTION AND MARRIAGE

In many cultures, education, caste, religion, race, nationality, age and other cultural factors play a significant role in the choice of a mate. Even in the most industrialised societies, these factors have not been entirely eliminated when choosing a marital partner.

In most Middle Eastern societies, mate selection operates within rather carefully defined limits. The State of Kuwait is one of them. A Kuwaiti youth, for instance, is expected to marry someone who shares his/her own religion, caste, nationality, age and socio-economic status. This practice is referred to as "assortative mating" or "homogamy".

In view of the strong influence of the factors listed previously, and the tendency toward heterogamy, the potential for a revolutionary change in the marital habits of Kuwaitis does exist.

People challenging the traditional homogamous norms and customs assert both the right and the desirability of marriage between persons of different groups. Persons who practice heterogamy would be committing a deviant behaviour from well established norms and values of marriage. Furthermore, when Kuwaiti men marry non-Kuwaiti women, many Kuwaiti women are left without a mate and therefore as victims of the negative social status that traditional Kuwaiti norms assigns to "unmarried women" (synonymous with the "old maid" in the West). When Kuwaiti women marry non-Kuwaiti men, political problems for the government can arise, such as civil rights, political participation, employment and rights of citizenship.

Kuwait is an Islamic country. Its laws and social institutions are governed by Islamic law (Shariah jurisprudence). Islam sanctions marriage not only as a social but also sacred contract. Sexual contact outside marriage is prohibited and thereby punishable. Indeed, Islam regards marriage as one of the most basic cohesive bonds of society. According to Islamic teachings, the only condition spouses must satisfy is that they profess Islam or one of the other Semitic religions (Judaism or Christianity). Considerations of class, colour, and race are repugnant to the Islamic moral code. Yet, members of different tribal groups (e.g., Assails and Bayssaries) seldom, if ever, intermarry, and marriage between individuals professing Islam but belonging to different races or nationalities is rare.

Marriage is a basic social institution. However, like any social institution, it is a product of socio-economic circumstances and situations. Social values and norms have a great role in determining mates selection and influence not only who one will marry, but also when. But values and norms change. Things that were once taboo in Kuwait such as women working outside the home, higher education for members of both sexes, and inter-cultural contact leading to befriending people from different cultures is now acceptable to an extent.

Mate selection can be classified into two major types :-

❶ Proposal Marriage: This procedure was very popular in the less developed societies where no space for emotional involvement before marriage or pre-marital relation of any kind encouraged. Selection was made by the elders of the family on who and when to marry.

❷ Love Marriage: Individual mate selection based on personal taste without interference from elders and parents. Since this type of selection is based purely on individual choice which includes personal and physical characteristics, there is always room for emotional involvement and pre-marital relations. This process is now much prevalent in the modernised and industrialised societies.

10/16

Kuwait is undergoing rapid social changes and mate selection is not an exception. In the Kuwaiti society one can witness a mixture of both types of mate selection during this transitional period. The prospective bride or bridegroom will choose his own partner and then the elders of the family will take it from there i.e. they will approach the family of the chosen partner and make the arrangements. The prospective candidate is involved in the decision making yet, the approach is made by the elders.

Family structure has also changed. Fathers were normally the authoritative powers who determined their families' norms values and passed them on to their sons and daughters; now they exhibit more flexibility and permit other members of the family, such as mothers and sons, to share this authority. For many Kuwaitis, the circle of marriage choices has become progressively wider. Socio-economic changes have made it impossible to continue the traditional "parallel cousin marriage" custom. The first step in widening the circle is to permit marriage with people from families in one's neighbourhood who are from the same religion and sect, then come neighbouring communities with similar cultural and ethnic background.

The widening of the range from which marital partners may be chosen is accompanied by a change in who does the selecting. It is no longer up to the family to choose a mate for the son or daughter; the individual him/herself makes the selection. Increase in educational and employment opportunities have gradually changed many of the society's traditional social values and norms, and this has an impact on the process of mate selection. Individual tastes and characteristics are increasingly replacing family concerns in the choice of marital partners.

B. MARRIAGE CEREMONIES

In the past, marriages were celebrated in their own homes for several days. People from the immediate neighbourhood were invited on the occasion. The festivities included traditional Arabic music. Nowadays, the ballrooms of five-star hotels are chosen as the venues to hold the reception parties. What a change ? The higher class people also hire belly dancers to perform at these parties in addition to having Western music being played. Even the list of attendees sometimes exceeds the 7,000 mark. But, one traditional aspect has still remained unchanged. The segregation - the party for men and women are held at different locations and some even have it on different evenings.

The male guests go to the groom and congratulate him and the female guests go to the bride to wish her and join in the celebration.

Another aspect of the marriage ceremony is the Mahr. Mahr refers to the specific sum of money given to the bride for her own use. There has ofcourse been a substantial increase in the amount during the past years. In ancient times, the sum was equivalent to almost US $20/- only, maximum US $50/-. The present times, Mahr is anything between US$20,000/- and 25,000/- and in some cases it also exceeds the latter amount. The bride's side is not responsible for the marriage celebrations.

The entire financial aspect is taken care of by the groom and his parents. The women are not allowed to spend for anything and the bride holds the sole right to the Mahr to do with it as she sees fit.

C. AGE CRITERIA

In an empirical study on immigration and social isolation in Kuwaiti society by Al-Gardawi (1984), the majority of the sample (63%) supported early marriage ideal and this idealism is still common in Kuwait and other Islamic societies because it is one of the attitudes encouraged by Islam.

Analysis proves that social change has affected the age of marriage. In this study, three groups were studied - Kuwaiti men marrying Kuwaiti women, Kuwaiti men marrying non-Kuwaiti women and Kuwait women marrying non-Kuwaiti men. Mean age at marriage differs for the three groups individually from the period 1974 to 1995, but for the three groups combined, it decreased for men. In 1974, the mean age of marriage for men was 28.2 years, in 1984 it was 27.9 years and in 1995 it was 26.2. For women, on the other hand, there was a slight increase from 22.2 years in 1974 to 22.4 in 1984 and then decreased to 22 years in 1995.

Of the three groups in the sample, the only one showing an increase in mean age of marriage for both men and women was Kuwaiti husbands/Kuwaiti wives. The mean age of Kuwaiti men marrying Kuwaiti women increased from 25.4 years in 1974 to 26.2 years in 1984 and then decreased to 24.5 in 1995. This may be because marrying a Kuwaiti woman requires a great financial backing from the groom, thus forcing him to wait to marry until he is financially secure. A decrease in the mean age was observed after the Gulf war, that could be because men wanted to feel even more secure. The mean age of Kuwaiti women marrying Kuwaiti men also increased-from 20.2 years in 1974 to 22.0 years in 1984 and later decreased to 21.6 in 1995. This may be because many women prefer to complete their college education and feel secure career-wise before marrying. The decrease in 1995 could again be attributed to feelings of security. Another factor may be that, as the educational level of Kuwaiti men increases, they increasingly seek more educated wives. Thus, more women tend to achieve more education before marrying. In addition, as individuals have increasing choice not only about who to marry but also about when, they are choosing to marry later.

Here is an example that is closer to home - My own father is a member of a generation when the age to marry was much less. I once asked my father the age at which he married my mother. His answer was "15 years old".

I myself married at the age of 34. My reason for marrying later in life was because I wanted to complete my graduation and only after I obtained my Ph.D. did I entertain thoughts of marriage. So you see the changes have been very practical and conspicuous.

A general reason for the increase in age at marriage is that parental expectations and duties have changed. At one time, it was parental responsibility to arrange the marriages of their children; they wanted to discharge this responsibility as early as possible to be certain their children were well-settled. Two factors have changed this situation.

First, as we have noted, young people have more say in their own choice of a partner. Second, since life expectancy has increased, perhaps the need for parents to arrange marriages of their children early has also changed (Korson & Sabzwari, 1985).

Burchinal (1960), in his work on young (early) marriage in 1960, predicted that rates of young marriages would decline; this has proven to be true. In his opinion, the increased value placed on higher education would have an impact on young marriages. "Increased school and post-high school attendance should be associated with a reduction in young marriage rates" (P. 7).

For other groups in the study, Kuwaiti men marrying non-Kuwaiti women, mean age of marriage decreased. For Kuwaiti husbands/non-Kuwaiti wives, mean age of marriage for men decreased from 35.8 years in 1974 to 30.0 years in 1984 and still further in 1995 to 27.2; for women it decreased from 23.8 years in 1974 to 22.7 years in 1984. This indicates a change that is not obvious from the data presented here. Formerly, older men who, for various reasons, had been unable to marry Kuwaiti women, went to less wealthy neighbouring countries to obtain a wife/wives.

But, with increasing social freedom, younger Kuwaiti men have made contact with non-Kuwaiti women and subsequently have taken the bold step of choosing a wife based on personal characteristics and relationships.

For the last group, non-Kuwaiti husbands/Kuwaiti wives, mean age at marriage has also decreased for both husbands and wives. For non-Kuwaiti husbands, it has decreased from 29.2 years in 1974 to 27.5 years in 1984. For wives, it decreased from 25.7 years in 1974 to 22.6 in 1984 and later an increase was observed to 24.0 in 1995 . An explanation for this could be that, in the past Kuwaiti women married non-Kuwaiti men only as a last resort.

Now that marriage is based on personal choice and relationships and as the society has changed and women have more contact with others in educational institutions and in the work-place, they are more likely to meet non-Kuwaitis and to marry non-Kuwaitis as a choice and not as a last resort. Additionally, influencing age of marriage, especially for Kuwaiti marriages, is the relative economic independence of children from family authority. A young man must be financially independent of his family in order to marry. Therefore, he finishes school and gets a job before deciding whom to marry and when. Since a young man has to cover marriage expenses (bride price, wedding ceremony, honeymoon, etc.), he delays until he can afford it.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Although social change has been taking place in Kuwait for the last three decades, people are still under kin pressure and the country's traditional method of mate selection still exists. There have been breakthroughs, but only on the individual level and against family rules, sometimes with social punishment (ostracism) and restrictions. This indicates that the society is in a stage between tradition and modernisation, a reform or transitional stage in which traditional and modern values exist together, and an individual may follow either, depending on his/her exposure to change and upon family and other social institutions.

At one time in Kuwait, a man's wife was from his extended family, a parallel cousin, or, in the case of Bedouins, from the same clan or tribe. In the case of urbanised groups, a mate not from the man's extended family came from a family having mutual socio-economic status. This concept is slowly changing.

This study has shown that Kuwaitis have a very strong tendency to marry homogamously in terms of age, religion, sect, nationality, and caste, although the numbers of those marrying across these lines has increased in the past 10 years, especially among people of higher socio-economic status who have college education and high status jobs. It is assumed that these kinds of marriages will be more dominant in the 1990s than they were before. Consequently, it seems that the Islamic resurgence has not only touched the political side of Kuwaiti life, but almost every aspect of social life and the institution of marriage as well.

****